DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 336 124 IR 053 735

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TITLE Preserving the Literary Heritage: The Final Report of the Scholarly Advisory Committee on Modern Language and Literature of the Commission on Preservation and Access.
INSTITUTION Commission on Preservation and Access, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Jul 91
NOTE 11p.
AVAILABLE FROM The Commission on Preservation and Access, 1785 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Suite 313, Washington, DC 20036 (free while the supply lasts).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Access to Information; Evaluation Criteria; Futures (of Society); Higher Education; *Library Collections; Literary Genres; Microfilm; Modern Languages; *Preservation; Scholarship; *Selection; *Twentieth Century Literature; *Use Studies

ABSTRACT

From the earliest discussions of the nationwide preservation challenge, it has been clear that neither time nor financial resources would permit the salvaging of all the books at risk. As a consequence, selection strategies are of paramount concern. To provide the scholarly perspective for these essential deliberations, the Commission on Preservation and Access has charged the Committee on Modern Language and Literature with the task of determining how scholars in this particular field use library materials in study and research, the types or genres of books and journals that are likely to remain of greatest importance and of least importance, and which strategies might make the selection-for-preservation process more effective for the needs of future scholars. This report, which marks the culmination of 18 months of such study by the committee, presents summaries of the types of preservation issues that were faced and the basic principles, recommendations, and actions which emerged from the committee's discussions. (MAB)

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COMMISSION ON PRESERVATION AND ACCESS

REPORT

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PRESERVING THE LITERARY HERITAGE

THE FINAL REPORT OF THE SCHOLARLY ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON MODERN LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE OF THE COMMISSION ON PRESERVATION AND ACCESS

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JULY 1991

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COMMISSION PREFACE

From the earliest discussions of the nationwide preservation challenge, it has been clear that neither time nor financial resources would permit the salvation of all the books at risk. As a consequence, selection strategies are of paramount concern.

To provide the scholarly perspective for these essential deliberations, the Commission has initiated a series of Scholarly Advisory Committees, each working in a specific discipline. The committees have been charged with examining how scholars in each field use library materials in study and research, what types or genres of books and journals are likely to remain of greatest importance (and of least importance), and which strategies might make the selection-for-preservation process more effective for the needs of future scholars. This report marks the culmination of 18 months of such study by the committee on Modern Language and Literature.

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Complimentary copies of this report have been distributed to the Commission's mailing list. Additional copies are available, while supplies last, at no charge from the Commission. The report has been submitted to the ERIC Clearinghouse on Information Resources.

Published by
The Commission on Preservation and Access
1785 Massachusetts Avenue, NW Suite 313
Washington, DC 20036

July 1991

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences-Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials ANSI Z39.48-1984.

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The Scholarly Advisory Committee on Modern Language and Literature met three times in Washington, D.C. at the offices of the Commission on Preservation and Access, once in the spring of 1990, once in the fall of 1990, and once in the winter of 1991. The members of the committee were: Emory Elliott (California, Riverside); John Fisher (Tennessee); Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Duke, now Harvard); Elaine Marks (Wisconsin, Madison); W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago); Rainer Nägele (Johns Hopkins); Annabel Patterson (Duke); Catherine Stimpson (Rutgers, New Brunswick); and J. Hillis Miller, Chair (California, Irvine).

Henry Riecken attended all three meetings as the representative from the Commission on Preservation and Access. His communications to the committee were extremely valuable in educating us in what has been done and what can be done in the area of preservation. Equally valuable was a presentation at the initial meeting by Patricia Battin of the Commission on Preservation and Access. George Farr, Director of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Office of Preservation, attended the third meeting, made a presentation about NEH activities in preservation to the committee, and discussed with us the specific problems in the area of modern language and literature.

It took the committee some time to educate itself about the scope and nature of the problem. We initially assumed it must somehow be possible to save everything. We began with some dubiety about the wisdom of using microfilm as the technique of preservation. Some members of the committee believed, or wanted to believe, that scanning and digitalizing techniques are already well enough developed to justify a switch to that form of preservation. We have gradually become aware of the enormous scope and urgency of the problem. If more than 80 million volumes in the nation's research libraries, about one quarter of

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our libraries' holdings, and more than 2.5 billion pages in the nation's archives are in danger of being lost through oxidization over the next fifteen or twenty years, some concerted plan needs to be established immediately. Large resources need to be deployed to preserve as many books as possible. Members of the committee have also been mindful of the value of the actual

physical books and of the need to preserve as many copies and editions as possible for the purposes of scholarly research. (See G. Thomas Tanselle, "Reproductions in Scholarship," Studies in Bibliography, 42 (1989), 25-54, for an eloquent defense for the need to have the actual books and papers for scholarly research.) But if these original books in all their copies and editions, along with all the papers in archives, printed or written on paper from the 1850's to the recent past, are slowly burning up, then microfilmed or digitalized preservation is obviously demanded.

...we have gradually come to recognize that probably only between 20 and 30 percent of brittle books and papers can be saved by microfilming.

Though we began with the assumption that of course everything could be duplicated and thereby saved, we have gradually come to recognize that probably only between 20 and 30 percent of brittle books and papers can be saved by microfilming. This situation has given this committee a painful sense of the responsibility entrusted to us to make recommendations not only about which 20 or 30 percent should be saved, but also, implicitly, about which 70 or 80 percent should be allowed to crumble away forever.

Some members of the committee began with the assumption that the solution to the problem would be to preserve by microfilming all the brittle books in one or another of the major American libraries, for example the New York Public Library or the Widener Library at Harvard. We came to recognize, however, that this would be unfeasible, both because no library in America, not even the largest, contains the best collections in every field, and also because no single library can bear the financial burden of cost sharing and the disruption of activities necessary for a total microfilming. Moreover, the exigencies of federal funding in a democratic country mean that the funds for preservation will necessarily be distributed to many libraries and collections around the country.

The challenge to our committee was to figure out ways within these uncomfortable restraints to make recommendations that would have the most likelihood of doing the best job that can be done in preserving as many as possible of the right books and papers. The committee was persuaded that its job would not be an easy one when a notice in the Modern Language Association's MLA Newsletter, a publication that reaches at least 30 thousand scholars, requesting letters of advice and opinion, produced only a handful of responses. Emory Elliott by a direct appeal to 75

colleagues in the field of American literature received about 25 constructive letters. But the committee became persuaded that much needs to be done to convince our colleagues of the magnitude and urgency of the problem.

We recognize that the field of modern language and literature is so broad and involves so many different fields, so many different languages, and so many different ways of doing research, scholarship, reading, and teaching, that it is exceedingly difficult to make simple rules for deciding which books and papers should be saved first. Almost any principle can be shown to be too limiting. For example, we began by feeling that major canonical authors published during the period of acid paper have probably been reprinted in modern scholarly editions on acid-free paper and so could be left to take care of themselves. This turned out not quite to be the case, not only because those modern acid-free scholarly editions are by no means complete and comprehensive, but also because, as Thomas Tanselle has argued, as many editions and copies as possible need to be preserved.

The committee believes it is extremely important to save representative examples of literature in less commonly taught languages and in work by women and minorities that would not be included in the standard traditional bibliographies. But this responsibility is a daunting one to the committee when confronted by the sheer number of languages and literatures included

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within its purview. Nevertheless, the committee established as one of its principles the need to protect by preservation the works in Yiddish, Russian, and Portuguese, as well as work by African Americans, native Americans, and women. On the other hand, the sheer bulk of material in a field like Victorian literature (there are, for example, at least 40 thousand "Victorian novels") presents another problem for preservation in our field. It will be difficult to decide exactly which works should be saved in large fields like Victorian literature.

Here is a summary of basic principles that emerged from our discussions:

1) We have a primary need to preserve representative examples of "rare and endangered species," that is books and papers in less commonly taught languages, by minorities, and by women.

2) Ancillary materials must also be preserved. This principle is based on the assumption that it is impossible to be sure now what works will seem essential to research, teaching, and for reading in the future. As a result, it is impossible to say of any category of books and papers, "these are not important and can be allowed to deteriorate."

3) A recognition of the obligation to preserve "canonical" books as well as the "endangered species."

4) Another principle that guided our deliberations and that makes an additional difficulty for making decisions in our area is our recognition that research and pedagogy in modern language and literature cannot take place without materials in history, popular culture, newspapers, magazines, graphic materials, and so on, materials that are not traditionally thought to be literature at all. Such materials would include medical journals, moral philosophy, encyclopedias, dictionaries, religious writings, private papers of authors, and so forth. Some means must be found to ensure that such essential ancillary materials for our field are also preserved. The need for such preservation of ancillary materials was another principle behind our deliberations.

5) Finally, we began with the unspoken assumption that the problem applied almost exclusively to modern language and literature. A little reflection, however, showed us that essential materials for the study of medieval, Renaissance, or eighteenth-century literature were published on brittle paper. For example, a member of the committee at its first meeting, Professor Annabel Patterson of Duke University, provided us with a list of such materials for Renaissance scholarship. Recognition that the problem of brittle books applies to all historical periods of modern language and literature was an additional principle of our deliberations.

Our meeting with George Farr of the NEH was an important turning point in our deliberations. We were persuaded by his presentation that our priorities and standards are shared by the NEH Office of Preservation, that microfilming is the best present method, that the NEH understands the need to have cultural diversity represented and to save representative books in such categories as dime novels and science fiction, and, finally, that there is a bibliographic control system that serves as a check against duplication of the same item, even though a large number of different libraries are involved. Strict standards for the quality of the microfilm are maintained, we are told, making the process more expensive but insuring high quality. General access will be assured through having copies of the microfilms available cheaply to everyone and by having two master copies of every film, one preserved in an underground vault. We also learned, in some detail, from George Farr how much has been accomplished in

the microfilming of brittle books. And we were reassured to hear of the careful and objective evaluation of applications for NEH funds in this area.

In the light of all these considerations, the Committee on Modern Language and Literature makes the following recommendations and has taken the following actions:

1) **Every possible action should be taken to educate our colleagues and our librarians in the magnitude of the problem**, for example by calling attention to the problem at conferences and at section meetings of the Modern Language Association, or, to give another example, by urging our own local university libraries to apply for grants for NEH funds for preservation of endangered books.

2) **We consider the question of bibliographic control to be essential.** If the effort of preservation is to be distributed widely, then we need to know that there is a foolproof mechanism in place making sure that each new microfilm will be immediately listed in two major bibliographic utilities, OCLC (Online Computer Library Center) and RLIN (Research Libraries Information Network)

3) **We urge that every effort be made to encourage the Congress to appropriate even more money for this essential task.** Though the money appropriated so far is large by the traditional standards of NEH funding, it is slight in comparison to the magnitude of the problem. The issue here is our whole cultural heritage as recorded in books and papers. This would be an emergency one-time expense. It is the strong conviction of this committee that 20 or 30 percent of the books and papers in modern language and literature is not enough. Ways should be found to educate not only the academic world but the general public, so that pressure can be put on Congress for increased funding. We rejoice to see that Congress's recent reauthorization of NEA and NEH "expands the Chair's authorization to include fostering book and other artifact preservation."

4) **The Committee remains anxious about liaison with European libraries. Their problems are presumably as large or larger than our own in this area.** It would be foolish for us to duplicate preservation efforts being made in Paris, London, or Berlin. Preservation efforts by European libraries are being synchronized with our own efforts. A beginning has been made. The Commission on Preservation and Access is supporting, through the European Community, the development of a common bibliographic record for the holdings of European libraries. This will enable OCLC and RLIN to have machine-readable records of books preserved abroad. An international conference on this urgent topic might be

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funded jointly by the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) and some suitable European counterpart, as was a conference held last year outside London on the question of computerizing libraries. The latter was useful in raising scholars' awareness and in bringing together experts in several fields and from several committees to discuss libraries and new technologies. A similar conference on preservation might be of great benefit.

5) This recommendation is probably the most important one this committee makes. It is also the one that we have already actively implemented. **We recommend that the Modern Language Association be used as the primary clearing house for recommendations** from all the various interest groups for which particular collections in each area are the most important and therefore should be the target of preservation.

The following actions have been taken to make our fifth recommendation work.

- A new "Statement on the Preservation of Brittle Books" will appear in the Summer 1991 Newsletter.

- Elaine Marks, newly elected Second Vice-President of the Modern Language Association, will make a presentation at the May meeting of the MLA Executive Council.

- In addition, Phyllis Franklin has agreed to host a breakfast meeting at the 1991 MLA Convention in San Francisco on this topic. Elaine Marks and J. Hillis Miller will chair that meeting. George Farr of the NEH will make a presentation like the one he made to our committee. A representative from each of the 76 division committees and 33 discussions groups of the MLA will be invited to that meeting.

- Each of those rèpresentatives will be urged to establish a procedure whereby that division or discussion group can within the next twelve months make a specific recommendation through the Committee on Modern Language and Literature to the Commission on Preservation and Access of the three most important collections in that field, along with other specific recommendations for preservation of material important in that area. If this procedure works, we shall have gathered a good number of specific recommendations from those scholars most expert in each of the separate fields and disciplines. These can be transmitted to the Commission on Preservation and Access and to the NEH as a resource for establishing priorities and

making decisions about the allocations of money for preservation.

- No small committee, however diverse and learned, like our own, much less any individual, can know enough about all the areas of modern language and literature to make intelligent recommendations about which are the best collections, but the Modern Language Association collectively should have that knowledge. For example, the two best collections of Victorian novels in the United States are at Illinois/Urbana and the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Which should be preserved? How much does one collection duplicate the other? These are questions for experts in the field. We feel that this procedure may make it possible not only to assemble that knowledge but also to publicize the urgency of the problem of brittle books.

6) **Finally, we recommend a continuing broad effort on the part of the scholarly community as well as the Commission to alert and inform colleagues, administrative officers at universities, and public officials everywhere about the seriousness of the decaying book problem.** We should also begin at once to incorporate this awareness into graduate instruction in research methods.

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If we are to ensure our intellectual heritage for those who follow us, we must involve every layer of society.

Return this form to indicate your areas of interest and involvement.

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